DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 144 415 FL 008 922

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TITLE Language Assessment Identifying LESA's.
PUB DATE Oct 76
NOTE 6p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bilingual Education; Child Language; *Diagnostic Tests; Educational Diagnosis; *English (Second Language); Identification Tests; Language Handicapped; Language Proficiency; *Language Tests; Mexican Americans; Primary Education; *Screening Tests; *Special Education; Testing; Test Reviews
IDENTIFIERS *Del Rio Language Screening Test; Language Dominance

ABSTRACT

Numerous instruments used by school districts to assess language dominance are not designed to determine either language dominance or proficiency. Nor do they yield sufficient data for appropriate program placement. One example of such an instrument is the Del Rio Language Screening Test (DRLST), designed to screen children of three to seven years of age who may require special education programs, and not bilingual education programs. It is recommended for use with students in the following language groups: (1) English-speaking Anglo-Americans; (2) predominantly English-speaking Mexican Americans; and (3) predominantly Spanish-speaking Mexican Americans. The test is not designed to test language dominance; it is designed to diagnose disorders in language performance. In conclusion, it is not recommended that school districts use this measure to identify students for placement in bilingual-bicultural programs. Rather, this test should be used in connection with bilingual special education programs. (Author/AM)

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Language Assessment Identifying LESA's

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October 1976

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As school districts respond with bilingual-bicultural instructional programs for children at the primary level, language assessment instruments become increasingly important for identifying those students to be served. Unfortunately, only a small percentage of children are identified as eligible for some type of bilingual instruction. This is partially due to the nature of the assessment conducted by a school district.

There are numerous instruments (locally developed, commercial, experimental) which purport to determine the language dominance of a child. Many of these however, are not designed for the purpose of determining language dominance or proficiency. Nor do they yield sufficient data necessary for appropriate program placement. Some of the instruments or procedures presently being used tap semantic information, vocabulary or receptive knowledge, instead of oral communicative competence (which includes not only the use of language structures and meaning but also the use of rules for generating patterns and thoughts in a social and cultural context). Assessing oral communicative ability is necessary for:

(1) accurate classification in a language group,

(2) determining language dominance,

(3) appropriate instructional placement and

(4) instructional decision-making.

A judgement which is based solely on observation, results from standardized achievement tests, previous low reading levels or a brief

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interview may cause a child to be placed in the wrong language category. For example, a child who can speak some English and is proficient in Spanish, might respond strictly in English in the classroom setting because he/she sees English as the appropriate language to be used. Although the child may be more functional in Spanish, the student could be misclassified as English dominant.

The following is a description of the Del Rio Language Screening Test (DRLST) which can be used (and has been misused) by school districts in identifying LESA students. The DRLST was designed to screen children of 3-7 years of age who may require "special" education programs (not bilingual instructional programs) and whose language of instruction has been previously identified.

Students in bilingual programs are often considered to have "language problems, bilingual problems or handicaps." The assumption made is that special education and bilingual education are synonomous. It is erroneous to assume that a student who is linguistically different requires special education and should be placed in a bilingual program.

The DRLST is recommended for use with students in the following language groups to diagnose deviances (disorders) in language performance, not language dominance:

English-speaking Anglo Americans,

Predominantly English-speaking Mexican Americans, and

Predominantly Spanish-speaking Mexican Americans.

The Del Rio Language Screening Test emphasizes memory tasks relative to the language development process. Portions of the test can be used as part of a more extensive diagnostic battery of tests with the language group identified. The instrument should be used as a diagnostic

tool with those students who have already been identified as having language disorders.

The DRLST makes no provisions for assessing a child's productive knowledge or use of the syntactical structures of English and Spanish. Children are asked to recall information and respond to the questions being asked with specific memory information. (Emphasis is on memorization for the Story Comprehension sub-test).

In administration of the test, the students are asked to:

(1) point to a picture,

(2) respond orally and

(3) perform an action.

Administering the test is time consuming because of the extensive number of items on all five subtests, which have an English and Spanish version for each:

Receptive Vocabulary

- includes 45 items
- assesses comprehension of single nouns and verbs which are presented in a hierachy of difficulty
- administrator elicits a nonverbal response

Sentence Repetition Length

- 16 sentences
- measures memory in a grammatically related sentence
- sentences increase in length and students must repeat verbatim

Sentence Repetition Complexity

- 14 sentences
- measures memory of short sentences which increase in grammatical complexity

. students must repeat verbatim

Oral Commands

. 16 commands

. measures memory for an increasing number of oral commands

. students must perform 1 to 4 tasks in a given command

Story Comprehension

. 5 stories

. assesses memory of information presented in brief stories

. students must recall specific information and respond to the questions (This subtest is extremely difficult for 3-5 year olds.)

Each subtest is scored individually and each correct response receives 1 point. Incorrect responses, such as changes in wording or sentence structure, do not receive points.

The child's score is compared to norms for Anglo American children, English-Speaking Mexican American children and Predominantly Spanish-speaking Mexican American children which are provided in the manual.

The cutoff score for diagnostic purposes is at or below the second standard deviation.

For screening purposes if a child falls below the tenth percentile, it is recommended that a more extensive language evaluation be conducted.

It is not recommended that this measure be used by school districts who are conducting student identification procedures for placement in bilingual-bicultural programs because it is not designed to assess the structural proficiency of a language necessary to classify students in language groups (i.e., Spanish Dominant, Biligual, Predominant English

Speaker, etc.). The DRLST elicits many nonvberbal responses and stresses memory tasks. If districts are attempting to identify children of limited English-speaking ability and measure the degree of oral language proficiency, the total battery used should be based on assessing productive communicative skills.

Districts should also look for an instrument that gives children the opportunity to use their existing language skills in order to make a determination as to whether a child is LESA or not. A procedure to identify the target population by dominant language should not require standardized responses if we are attempting to measure the degree of linguistic ability of each student within social and cultural domains.

In conclusion, school personnel making instructional decisions for placement in bilingual programs should select the instrument that will yield the necessary data and one which is structured to determine language dominance and not language disorders.

There is a growing need for instruments that screen those students with known language disorders. The DRLST is one such instrument and should be considered by school districts who have bilingual special education programs and the bilingual personnel for work with children in need of these specialized services.